

Chapter 2

Stalking Elizabeth Greene was pure filth. My work chair became infested with cockroaches and millions of them seemed to be running amok in my back. Each click and drag of the mouse moved through molasses and stuck to my desk. It didn't help that I still had empty packets of crisps and coke cans stacked all around. A leftover from the crunch time a week ago when the genius big boss somehow managed to cause a server outage company wide. I didn't have time to clean. Here I was, already connected to her on an emotional level and yet I didn't know the most basic things about her.

Why she preferred to kill with a knife, if she kept any mementos or how she would describe the best moment of her life, the one right after the kill. It was the killer equivalent of forgetting the name of your date. It was rude. I lifted my 'always happy to see you' mug to have the horrendous work coffee.

At last, the notification that my botnet had penetrated her firewall came through and I had her PC IP address. It was a good thing too, since she bricked her phone remotely before I could get much more than her name. I could forgive her panic. I did try to murder her ever so slightly after all. *But oh Liz, why would you shop through a dinky local website if you didn't want to be found?* Didn't she know that Amazon had much better security? She wanted me to find her. After all, she of all people must have understood that there had to be some challenge to get the thrill of the hunt. Though in the future, we would have to have a chat about online security and who she gave her data to. There were some dangerous creeps out there hacking for fun.

I looked up from my screen to a knock on my door and Will popped his head in. I sat straight up. This was the first time he came into my office and I had to have a frantic look around at the mess. He had his 'interesting' flamingo tie on, but of course he was confident enough in

his masculinity to pull it off. All you had to do was to look at how he carried himself. A suave curve infected every inch of his body, like he was made of silk. Time waited for him. He began with that oh so darling smile of his, 'Hey man, is this IT? I'm still learning. I've got an issue with my Microsoft Teams and I'm supposed to have a meeting. Could you please have a look?'

He couldn't even be bothered to remember a three syllable name? The guy has been here for three months and yet he was still learning. I was so glad that he clarified with 'Microsoft' since otherwise I would have had no idea what he could have possibly been referring to... I didn't smile when I said, 'It's Daniel, I'll have a look in a second.'

'Please Dan I need—wait. Do I know you from somewhere?'

I specifically told him to call me Daniel but no, he had to go there. He had to make it out like we were friends. I exhaled, 'Yeah. St. John Stone secondary?'

'Oh shit—I mean sorry, but Super-Dan? That's you?'

'...Yeah. Although I would prefer if you didn't call—'

'I can barely recognise you! Super-Dan, oh man, how the hell are you? It's been a while. Do you still have your super facts? *Have you been hiding one from me this whole time?*' He leaned over as he spoke, as if he were trying to egg me on. I looked at my feet, as if there was an answer there but then decided to look up to meet his eye. I shouldn't be afraid any more. 'No, I don't. School was a long time ago, Will.'

'Ah. I mean, I know. Look man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit a sore spot, I'm just messing about. But really, it's good to see you.'

'Yeah...'

Will stood there for a moment staring into nothing with an absent look on his face as he put his hands on his hips. He smiled, then he finally shook his head and turned back to me, 'So... Could you have a look at my computer?'

'I've already told you that I will have a look in a second.'

I turned back to my screen and started to type gibberish into Notepad with a frown. Will stood there, unmoving. I looked back up at him without stopping the typing and he gave me a smile. Again. His shirt had a drop of ketchup on it and his greasy hair was combed through. We were the same age, and yet the silvered hair made him look closer to 50 than to 30. Alright, there was no delaying this. When I stood up, I was surprised that he was now shorter than me. His shoulders were slumped. Safe in the knowledge that I had the height advantage, I released the tension in my neck. I looked at him, and he gestured with his hand towards the exit. 'Thanks Dan, I really appreciate it' he said.

Maria the receptionist stopped talking when I walked past, as usual, and Will seemed to notice. Great. Just great. Will spat in one eye so why shouldn't Maria spit in the other? If they kept this up then Maria would move up to number five on the office list. Even with the popularity of school shootings nowadays I would be the first office shooter and would probably make the headlines—I shook my head. I didn't want to suicide by cop or to run to become Luiz the Brazilian builder yet. But what if I just killed her cat—

'Ok so here we are, work your magic Dan!'

He really felt the need to include my name in every sentence, didn't he? His 'Microsoft' Teams kept popping up an error, even after a reset, so I restarted his PC. As it was booting back up, Maria walked over, 'Hey, Will right?'

Will turned to face her with an enormous smile and said, 'Well, that depends on who's asking?'

'I'm Maria' she said, then tapped her name tag as she rocked on her heels, trying to add some movement to the silence, I would imagine. I had done that too many times myself to not recognise it.

Will gave her an out when he said, 'Have you heard any good gossip lately? From what I hear this Will guy is a right prick.'

Maria chuckled and her cheeks flushed. Small talk. Riveting. Then, she continued, 'What? No, come on! People like you. It's a big company and people already know your name. You're approachable.'

'Is that so? Is it the ketchup stain? I was thinking about approachability when I put it on this morning.'

I let out a booming laugh that was way louder than the chuckles they exchanged so they both looked at me. After a moment, Will cleared his throat and turned back to Maria, 'So how long have you been here?'

'About 3 years... A job's a job right? Most of the people here have been with us for years, so you don't see many fresh faces here. I mean — yeah...' She took a deep breath in and let her arms hang, then tried to hide the maddening red of her cheeks with a plastic smile.

'Well, to improve is to change, to perfect is —' I cut Will off

'I've been here for 4 years.'

They both turned to face me and moderated their smiles, then Maria shuffled some dust with her foot during the pause. 'Yeah, that's pretty normal—that's most of us like I said.' She turned back to Will, 'So, I — the reason I came over was to ask you — do you know about the company boat party? If you haven't gotten the evite yet, I think that you should come. To meet the team, I mean, not like you don't know the team but, free alcohol... You know?'

She shrunk down into a husk when she finished speaking, looking up with the last ounce of strength. I couldn't watch, it was too real. But when I turned to my tired reflection in the monitor, I stared back at them again.

'I'd love to. To meet the team, of course,' Will said. That sentence breathed new life into Maria and her smile looked genuine for the first time since she began this conversation. She straightened up and they were level again, staring into each other's eyes for a moment. Maria then turned to me and shrivelled into a husk again, 'And—and Dan, you should come too. It will be fun.'

‘Yeah, sure.’ I said, attempting to break the table in half with grip alone. I had half a mind to dig out that email and actually show up just so that I could murder them both. Someone had to save the world from any possible offspring that they could produce.

Maria nodded at Will and turned in an instant, power walking back to her station, as if Will scared her away. Will shook his head and slapped a hand on my back, ‘Take it from me mate, you can’t have them all.’

It would have been nice to have some, but I would sooner die than to tell him that. Changing jobs was the last thing that I wanted so I wasn’t about to give Will any ammunition. Although, after this spectacle he could have seen that I had changed minimally since secondary school, a few extra hobbies excluded.

The table creaked under my machine-like grip. It added some high notes to the silence. I savoured each click of the mouse as a momentary reprieve and as a sign that I was actually doing something. I opened the console and put on my best concentration face as I watched the startup sequence code whizz past. It was the equivalent of lifting the hood of a perfectly running car, only to shut it again and saying: ‘Yes, quite!’ but Will didn’t know this. To him I was one with the machine and I spoke in binary.

I was about to begin the reinstall, but then Will placed his hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, Will had the expression of a war widow opening the door to the visitation officer. I darted my gaze up and down, studying him. He squeezed my shoulder harder and I watched the muscles in his throat dance as it seized up. The Great William, at a loss for words. I would have smiled at the thought if I didn’t have the anguish of a thousand souls peering into me.

‘So... Um — I’ve never had the chance to talk to you since we went our separate ways, but I’m sorry for the way I treated you in secondary school. I mean — there’s not much else I could say I suppose. If I could take back what happened I would, really. So, I guess here goes, I’m really sorry Dan.’

Not good enough, I wanted to say. Instantly, I was in Ms. McCormack's classroom, listening for footsteps and peering at the exits, huddled under the desk. He had a particular path through the school that he always took, checking everywhere. I was sure of that. Methodical. To this day, a rapid heartbeat and the smell of mouldy books brought me back right there. The warmth of her desk heater and that thick taste of warm linoleum in the air engulfed me again. The shellshock of the shiver shot through my body, like an old wound opening up. And here he was, thinking that an apology would do. *Not good enough*.

'People change, apologies accepted,' I said and turned back around as his gaze was too intense. Will was behind me as I was reinstalling Teams on his computer, so all I heard was the shuffling of his feet. When I looked back, he gave me a half smile and a nod. The demons have left his face. The light glimmered from his gaudy gold ring. It had a black onyx stone that seemed way too big for his hand. Something about it sucked me in, and the myriad of refractions reminded me of the brilliant blanket from the night before. Nature's music started playing in my ears again, and I imagined Will laying on the grass next to me. Cold and pale, his arms frozen and pointing up. I smiled, then I gave Will a nod back.

'All done, all you needed was a quick reinstall.' I said.

'Hey, thanks man, I really appreciate it,' he stepped closer and lowered his voice, 'And if you ever need a favour, anything at all, just give me a shout. Ok?'

'Appreciate it. I'll keep that in mind,' I said. My smile slid off my face and into the bin as soon as I was out of sight. I began my walk back to my office. When I was weak, he gave me hell and now that I am strong he gave me pity some 18 years later. Pity. Like I was beneath him, this pond scum. This would mark the last time that I was scared of him. Our first exchange after years and this was what I got. All for him to treat me like gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe. A shiver went through me after which I solidified. Clay into brick. I would have respected him more if he stayed the same for all of these years. At least he would have been consistent. Pity. God. These people always acted so high and mighty just because they knew what to say. It was me

that saw things clearly, me that could do things that were needed. Did any of them have even a fraction of my drive or my intellect? Were they really all that superior, or could it be, maybe, that they should come to me for advice? My God... *Pity*... I pitied him!

Did he deserve the number one slot on the office list? Although, this had to be an improvement over Karen who thought that I was a rapist... As if I could be that shallow.. So maybe a two then, although it was very close, I had to let it marinate. Kill lists always came to me when I wasn't thinking about them, when inspiration struck.

I traced the outline of my mouth with a thumb as I made long strides back to my office. Back to business. Liz was a special case, and as I sat back down in my chair I scrolled through all of the accounts registered with the online shopping site that she used. When I finally found her, I saw those flowy characters that displayed the shipping address in Cambridge. A few more types and I saw that the Great Northern only took an hour to get there from Kings Cross. I could stay there overnight and be back on time for work in the morning although I doubted that anyone would even notice me gone. This place was running on autopilot with all the scripts anyway.

That would mean that I could stay there for all of tomorrow as well. Jesus! I would have never considered losing my cover job like this even two days ago. But Liz felt like the one that I was waiting for this whole time. I said that on more than one occasion before, but none of my previous potentials had been killers themselves. Well — Ryan didn't count; he only killed in the army which gave him PTSD, instead of vindication. He was weak. Liz wasn't weak. And I would see her again very soon.

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Cambridge had legacy and it showed in the architecture. The buildings were built out of stone, a material that was made to last centuries, instead of decades. The rows of the irregular

smooth brown slabs blended seamlessly with the yellow Victorian brick houses. In the town centre, there was a patch of grass where cows were left to roam and laze in the brilliant sun. A hold over from the mediaeval era no doubt. I took in the trees and the smell of freshly cut grass as I meandered over to her house. Where people lived said a lot about them. In the modern era, you could move across the country, or even the world, on a whim. If you stayed where you were born you did so out of loyalty, and Liz was loyal.

I stopped at an ice cream truck and got myself a cone to eat along the way. The sun baked me while I enjoyed my snack. The cold trickled into me and spread in my chest. If only I could feel my insides more often. A cold infecting you, chilling to the bones. But walking along people paid scant attention to me, it was almost as if I was a *casual*. As a lawyer, Liz could have moved down to London and earned big money with her 10 years of experience. But she opted to stay up here and work as a legal aid for the government instead. Could it have been the killer instinct, making her choose something more remote? Or maybe I was getting ahead of myself before I even had a look around. Again.

Her house was semi detached and built out of the characteristic yellow brick. It had a small garden with nothing but grass, a driveway with two parking spots and a car. Though, I guessed that the owner of said car was currently missing some bits and becoming one with nature in a shallow grave. She was not making this easy for me by going to work without even moving his car. The first thing the police would do was to check his bank card to see if he paid for any transport. If he didn't, then it could be assumed that he died locally as his car was here and someone close killed him. That would not do but I would fix this later.

First I let myself in with the lockpick and started to get changed into clean attire and gloves. There was a row of pictures on the wall and I got closer to inspect my prize. Her full cheeks looked ready to collapse if it weren't for her gargantuan smile. It was so unnaturally wide that it looked like botched plastic surgery and made the hairs stand on the back of my neck. The

white of her wedding dress perfectly contrasted her dark Caribbean skin. Her features were small and delicate, making a scant impact on her face.

She was embraced by the man with no penis, kissing her on the cheek. I would have gotten angry if I didn't have absolute proof that he was already worm food. She had deep dimples and should have looked jubilant. I knew something the rest of them didn't. This was her mask. Where casuals saw a happy couple, I saw a woman that could offer the world more. My dear fallen angel.

For once, I actually had evidence to back up my claim; murder and mutilation didn't come out of nowhere. They built up over years. This photo was recent since it was from their wedding 8 months ago so the hate was already there. This was bad, as it made her motive even stronger with the financial motivation. I slipped the photo out of the frame and ripped the eunuch out to put Liz's photo in my pocket.

I moved on to the bookshelf. There was no doubt that this was all her. Seneca, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and all of the other Latin greats were lined up. There seemed to be a focus on the law and politics, I for one had no use for The Philippics, but it was great to see another student of Latin.

The living room had two mismatched cabinets on opposite ends of the room, each with different items displayed. The two halves were so distinct that I could have divided the room in two with some tape. Like marking territory. Yikes. There was home cooked roast dinner in the fridge on two plates. It made it seem as if she thought he was coming back. Great thinking.

What was less good was the pillow and covers on the couch in the living room. Those kinds of marital problems had a habit of being picked up on by friends and family so again, more motive. Upstairs, there was the master bedroom with an en suite bathroom. When I entered, I saw a chair with cut ropes and a spray of dried blood, as well as a bloodied knife. There were only specks of blood here, so this wasn't where he died. Interesting.

The final room had a bunch of boxes in it, and a half assembled crib. If there was one thing that didn't mix with people like us it was kids. You couldn't abandon them but were incapable of feeling for them. The lack of a proper relationship continued for years or you gave up your cover to give them away to social services. It was a bad business all around. No one deserved to grow up in a group home. Least of all innocent kids. There was no way for us to keep killing with a kid on the way, so we would have to talk about that. After I was back downstairs, I munched on an apple from the kitchen as I sat in Dr. Cockoff's seat and waited for her. It was 7 pm now, she finished work an hour ago, so she should be home any minute.